NEW YORK TIMES
30 MAY 1971

[redacted]

Intelligence:

I Spy, You Spy, But What Do We See?

WASHINGTON—Eleven years ago it was the "missile gap," and before that there was the "bomber gap." Two years ago there was the "first-strike threat" of large Soviet SS-9 missiles. And now there is the "big hole" threat.

Through all those Soviet threats—each one of which at the time was more presumed than real—runs a common American strand. On the basis of disturbing yet inconclusive intelligence information, the Administration —and the Defense Department in particular—drew ominous conclusions about Soviet strategic intentions and urged a new round of weapons build-up by the United States.

The latest case in point involved the big missile silo holes that American reconnaissance satellites began detecting in the Soviet Union, starting last December. As yet, they are just holes, admittedly larger than those the Soviets have dug before, but that did not stop the Defense Department and its Congressional allies from drawing conclusions about the missiles the Soviet Union intended to put in the silos.

Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington, who first disclosed the detection of the large new holes on a national television program, warned that the "Russians are now in the process of deploying a new generation, an advanced generation of offensive systems." Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, on another television show, followed up by stating that the silo construction "confirms the fact that the Soviet Union is going forward with the construction of a large missile system." Coupled with these statements were warnings that the strategic balance might be tipping in favor of Moscow.

Then last week, through Republican sources in the Senate, it came out that the Central Intelligence Agency believed that at least two-thirds of the 60 silo holes detected so far were for the Soviet SS-11. This is a relatively small intercontinental missile comparable to the United States Air Force's Minuteman, and the Defense Department has acknowledged that it is too small to present a first-strike threat to the American retaliatory force. The size of the holes, the C.I.A. surmised, could be explained by the possibility that the Soviet Union was "hardening" its missile silos against attack, just as the United States has been doing for its Minutemen.

After that disclosure, the Defense Department began retreating. The new holes, it conceded, could be for "hardening" with concrete liners. But still, the Pentagon said, they were big enough to hold two new types of missiles, or perhaps improved models of the SS-11 and SS-9. At any rate, the Defense Department admitted, the intelligence information was too inconclusive to draw definitive judgments. That was a far cry from the impression created earlier by the Defense Department, that the Soviet Union was deploying an improved version of the SS-9 or perhaps even a larger new missile aimed at a first-strike capability.

"We have just witnessed the shortest missile gap in history," proclaimed Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin, the Pentagon's gadfly. "In a month, without the United States lifting a finger or spending a dime, this missile gap was closed. The 'scare-'em' technique boomeranged."

Perhaps, as suggested by Senator Proxmire, there was just an element of politics in the selective disclosure of intelligence information about the big holes. Every spring, just as regularly as the cherry blossoms bloom on the Tidal Basin, there crop up dire new warnings about Soviet weapons with a timing that just happens to coincide with Congressional consideration of the defense budget.

The problem, however, goes deeper than political use of intelligence information, which is probably inevitable when that information has to be translated into policy and appropriations by the politicians in the Executive Branch and Congress. In part, the difficulty, as the Nixon Administration is coming to realize, lies in the disjointed way that intelligence is gathered and analyzed.

In principle, the C.I.A. was set up after World War II as a policy-making agency that could provide unbiased intelligence analysis. Its director, presently Richard M. Helms, was to be the President's principal intelligence adviser. But in practice, intelligence was never completely centralized, and the C.I.A. directors have discovered that it is impossible to divorce analysis of intelligence from policy.

The Central Intelligence Director, for example, has virtually no authority over the 3,000-man Defense Intelligence Agency, which helps explain why the C.I.A. and the Defense Department could reach such differing interpretations over the big holes.

Even if intelligence operations should be further centralized—perhaps at the White House level, as is now being considered by the Nixon Administration—the problem would not be completely solved. The underlying difficulty is that intelligence is not a game of certainties but of conjectures. As in the case of the big holes, certain conjectures must be drawn on the basis of limited, circumstantial facts, and inevitably the conclusions tend to reflect the philosophical outlook and responsibilities of the policymaker.

With a responsibility for national security, the Defense Secretary has a natural tendency to choose the most pessimistic among the range of conjectures reached from agreed-upon but limited intelligence facts. That is what Mr. Laird did when he projected two years ago that the Soviet Union would deploy 500 SS-9's by 1975, and what he did when he saw the pictures of the big holes.

The difficulty is that this kind of approach can lead to a self-fulfilling form of "worst case" analysis, in which the worst that is assumed about Soviet intentions comes true because of the American reaction — or vice versa. Thus, the United States sees a "missile gap" and starts rapidly deploying them on land and on sea. The Soviet Union then starts deploying missiles at a great rate until it has more land-based missiles than the United States, which starts talk of another missile gap when those big holes are spotted.

Testifying last week before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Dr. Herbert Scoville Jr., former Deputy Director for Research of the C.I.A., said that if it now turns out that the Soviet Union is putting SS-11's in the big holes "then we must ask ourselves how many times are we going to allow the 'weaponeers' to come before Congress, shouting 'missile gap' and 'technology gap,' when in reality they are only creating another 'credibility gap,' through selective disclosure of partially analyzed intelligence, in order to panic the country into expensive weapons programs."

That question is now beginning to be asked in Congress, which is far less gullible and more sophisticated than it was a decade ago, when it was willing to assume the unproved worst about Soviet intentions. Perhaps there is also a change in attitude down at the White House, where the President is willing to accept the possibility of an agreement limiting defensive ABM systems despite all the Pentagon talk about those Soviet offensive missiles. This change of attitude can probably be more important than any reorganization of intelligence agencies in preventing the Executive Branch and Congress from seeing missiles in holes where none yet exist.

—JOHN W. FINNEY

[redacted]

STATINTL